

Police, fire crews 'may not be able to respond' after Cascadia

Emergency preparedness forum to stress self-sufficiency

By Erick Bengel
EO Media Group

Immediately after a Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake, emergency responders, including those from Cannon Beach, will likely be as paralyzed as everyone else.

"The city may not be able to respond at all," Astoria City Councilor Drew Herzig said.

Residents and visitors unlucky enough to be on the North Coast when the "big one" hits should plan to take care of themselves, he said.

"We're not trying to terrify people, but we're trying to be honest with them about what they can expect from city services," Herzig said. "And the reality of our situation with a Cascadia event is that there's going to be very little service left."

Later this month, a panel of four experts — Althea Rizzo, geologic hazards program manager at Oregon Emergency Management; Tyree Wilde, warning coordination meteorologist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; Patrick Corcoran, coastal natural hazards specialist with Oregon State University; and Neal Bond, protection unity forester at the Oregon Department of Forestry — will speak at the Liberty Theater on Astoria and Clatsop County's state of disaster readiness.

The Community Emergency Preparedness Forum May 31 covered a range of natural disasters facing the North Coast, from winter storms to wildland fires to a catastrophic earthquake and tsunami.

"Even though it may be tough to take in, it's something we need to start facing up to. Knowledge is power, particularly in something like this," Herzig said. "It's going to happen, we just don't know when. So the more we can prepare for it, the better."



In this March 11, 2011, file photo, ocean waters of a tsunami surge from a Japanese earthquake hit the shoreline in Seaside. Up and down the coast of the Pacific Northwest, communities have been intensifying their efforts to protect lives when the region is hit by a killer quake and tsunami, which seismologists say is inevitable.

Devastating to infrastructure

Astoria does not face the same tsunami threat as Seaside and Cannon Beach because the city is several miles upriver from the coast, although it still faces significant waterfront inundation from rising sea levels, Astoria Fire Chief Ted Ames said.

The primary threat is the earthquake itself.

"If we were to face a seismic event, like ... the 9-point-something-magnitude earthquake off the coast — that nearshore event — we know that it will be devastating to infrastructure," Astoria Police Chief Brad Johnston said.

Bridges will fail. Buildings will fall. Large swaths of earth will liquefy and produce landslides. City roads and streets — crushed, collapsed or covered in debris — will be impassable.

Even with the best of intentions and most professional of forces, Astoria police and fire departments will have severely diminished — perhaps nonexistent — rescue capabilities after a megaquake and tsunami.

"If we have that scale of an event, you will not see first responders rolling up in their patrol cars. It's not going to be possible," Johnston said. "When you think about Astoria and the geography and the nature of the roadways, there's a good chance it's going to be very difficult to get places (with) things other than horses, mountain bikes, dirt bikes, ATVs and those kinds of things."

The fire department will be in the same situation: "I don't think it's realistic to think that we would be driving fire trucks around town trying to help people," Ames said.

Self-sufficiency

"I can't sit here as fire chief and tell you exactly what's going to happen, 'cause I don't have a clue,"

Ames said. "I just don't think that it's a real great outlook when we think about a major event."

"I'm probably scaring the hell out of people, but that's the way it is," he added.

Corcoran said that, as soon as high-magnitude earthquakes occur, power lines fall and arc, and gas and water lines break.

"So now you've got gas fires starting all over the place and no water to put them out," he said. "People's current sense of, 'Well, when my house is on fire, the entire fire department comes to help me,' is wrong."

Johnston advises citizens to prepare themselves, mentally and materially, such that they could survive without first responders and even help their neighbors.

"It's really important for



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Safety and survival equipment are shown in the back of a truck during a tsunami drill with the Coast Guard in January.

people to have that ability to care for themselves in those initial hours because it's going to be tough," he said, adding that emergency management specialists now tell people to plan for a period of self-sufficiency lasting at least 14 days. "It will be some time before government is able to re-establish that infrastructure, and the people are going to have to be prepared for that."

"Professionals don't like to say — especially cops and firemen — that they're not going to be there for you," Corcoran observed. "So, when they're telling us that they're not going to be there for us, I think you really need to pay attention to that."

A reminder

Focusing on emergency preparedness is one of the City Council's goals for the year.

"We've been lagging behind places like Cannon Beach and some others. They're much more exposed to the tsunami, so they're much more aware of the danger," Herzig said. "In Astoria, pretty much most of us are safe from the tsunami, but the preceding earthquake is go-

ing to be devastating, and we need to start becoming aware of that."

It takes a serious mental effort for many people to imagine themselves in an emergency as dire as Cascadia, let alone how they would act, he added. "Nobody wants to go there."

Corcoran sees this resistance to contemplating natural disasters as a product of evolutionary hardwiring; creeping threats, whether Cascadia or climate change, tend not to register as important. Of course, this condition makes preparing for these threats all the more challenging.

"In general, preparing for hazards is something, as human beings, we tend not to do," he said. "We have to remind ourselves to do that once in a while."

The emergency preparedness forum, he said, is intended as such a reminder.

"We haven't been around the block before on (Cascadia). We have to share what the research says, what happened in Japan, other kinds of places," he said. "When it happens again, I guarantee you, we're going to wish we would've done more."

Make sure you are prepared for big one

Cascadia Rising, a region-wide functional exercise takes place June 7-10. As an emergency preparedness exercise that encompasses all aspects of emergency response, the exercise brings together Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Federal Emergency Management Agency to prepare for a mega earthquake. Major Oregon cities, 23 counties, nine tribal nations, 17 state

agencies and departments, the American Red Cross, and two private sector partner organizations have signed on to participate. Emergency operations and coordination centers at all levels of government will activate to coordinate simulated field response operations within their jurisdictions and with neighboring communities, state, federal and a variety of military resources.



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